The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens for Medway

Victoria Gardens, Chatham

August 2014

Victoria Gardens

Chatham, Kent

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INTRODUCTION

This site description and accompanying dossier have been prepared by the Kent Gardens Trust as part of its wider review of **The Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens.** This part of the review, carried out for Medway Council in 2013 -14, covers sites within the Medway local authority area with the aim to:

a) Review the historic nature, content, current state and significance of the sites currently identified in the **Kent Compendium of Historic Parks and Gardens** for the Medway local authority area along with others identified by Medway Council. The review has been undertaken using English Heritage's criteria for identifying the significance of local heritage assets to provide a consistent approach. The revised list of sites has the potential to support development of a Local List of historic sites in Medway should the Council wish to progress this in future[1]. The list of sites researched and evaluated in this review would be subject to consultation as part of any Local List development and is therefore not intended to be final.

b) Inform future funding applications for historic spaces by the identification of significance

c) Inform future conservation and/or any development of sites by the identification of the significance of key historic character, features and association including that of setting and viewpoints.

The extent of the area identified represents the current surviving area of the designed landscape, the boundary line generally reflecting the maximum extent of the historic gardens or parkland (although there are exceptions such as where land has been irreversibly lost to development). The boundary line takes no account of current ownership. Further information is available from the contacts listed below. The partnership would like to thank the volunteers and owners who have participated in this project and given so much of their time, effort and hospitality to complete this challenging and rewarding task.

Medway Council
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& Library Services
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Kent Gardens Trust
www.kentgardenstrust.org.uk

English Heritage
www.english-heritage.org.uk

[1] English Heritage (2012) '*Good Practice Guide to Local Listing*'

SITE DESCRIPTION

KENT **VICTORIA GARDENS**
Medway

NGR: 575341 167730

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Victoria Gardens, Jackson's Recreation Ground and Fort Pitt Gardens form an interconnected group of 3 late C19 to mid C20 public gardens and parks in which remnants of their original design survive. All 3 are laid out over the redundant, surviving remnant earthworks surrounding the former C19 Fort Pitt, their landforms reflecting the underlying topography of the earthworks. The sites thus have archaeological potential; they are also a repository for both local and national collective memories of Chatham's vital role in the defence of the United Kingdom from the C18 to the end of World War II. The sites represent Rochester and Chatham's response in the C19 and early C20 to providing open space for the health and wellbeing of the inhabitants plus local acts of philanthropy: Victoria Gardens commemorates Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 while the land for Jackson's Recreation Ground was donated by the Mayor of Rochester, John Howard Jackson, in 1914. All three sites contribute to the scenic quality of the wider area through the panoramic views they offer over the towns, the River Medway and beyond and in views from the historic New Road, the main route between Rochester and Chatham since 1783.

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORIC INTEREST

A public park laid out in 1897 by Chatham Town Council, on land formerly owned by the Ordnance Department, to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria with early C20 alterations and additions. It comprises amenity grassland, late C19 and C20 ornamental trees, pathways and various structures, some dating to the park's original construction. Along with Fort Pitt Gardens and Jackson Recreation Ground (qv) immediately adjacent to the west, the park occupies land formerly part of the nearby early C19 Fort Pitt.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

The hilltop site of Fort Pitt, south of Chatham, appears to have been farmed from at least Roman times (finds by workmen in 1932: Fort Pitt, John Cooper Kent County Library 1976). In the early C19 Fort Pitt was built on the area immediately to the southwest of the Gardens and the fort's associated earthworks extended westwards onto land that now comprises the adjacent Jackson Recreation Ground. This marked the start of anti-invasion defences against the perceived threat of a French invasion during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1812 two supporting towers, Delce to the west and Gibraltar to the east, the latter a defensible two storey brick- built guardhouse with earthworks around it (Tithe map of 1841/2), were constructed on its flanks to defend access to Rochester Bridge. The 2nd edition OS map (1897-1909) indicates earthworks associated with Gibraltar

Tower which was demolished in 1879 to allow the building of St Andrews Church (3rd edition OS map 1907-1923). Other elements of the fort's outer earthworks survive in the adjacent site of Jackson Recreation Ground.

Fort Pitt appears to have been completed by 1813 (Kendall 2005) and retained as such into the 1820's. However in 1828 it was converted to a hospital for invalided soldiers and by 1847 an asylum for servicemen was built within an enclosed section of the fort. By 1849 it became a general military hospital and in 1860 Florence Nightingale started the first Army Medical School on the site whilst waiting for the completion of a new school at Netley. Parts of Fort Pitt were demolished in the early C20 with the remainder bought in 1929 by the Local Education Board from the War Department and converted the hospital buildings to provide accommodation for a Technical School for Girls. The casemated barracks were demolished in 1932 to allow new development although this didn't take place until 1968. New educational buildings were erected after WWII and there are currently three institutions: Fort Pitt Grammar School, Mid Kent College and the University of the Creative Arts (formerly the Medway College of Design, erected between 1967 and 1970) its outline inspired by the profile of Fort Pitt with three broad terraces stepping down the hillside. Any remains of the original Fort occupy areas outside the present boundary of the Gardens.

In 1875 the grounds to the east of the Fort were leased on an annual tenancy to Chatham Town Council and stayed as rough ground until 1897. The 2nd edition OS map (1897- 1900) indicates footpaths across the site, various boundary stones and earthworks forming cuttings and embankments on the western boundary and on the north-eastern corner at the site of Gibraltar Tower which had been demolished. In March 1897 a decision was taken by Chatham Town Council to formalise use of the ground into Victorian Pleasure Grounds in celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The works cost £1,420, with the Corporation borrowing £1,400 in 1898 to cover the expenses. This sum was repaid over a period of 22 years.

The grounds were formally opened on 15th September 1897 by the Mayoress Mrs H T Brown and dedicated to the public. The grounds were laid out with 4m (12 ft.) wide formal 'cement' paths, a bandstand (with gas lighting), wrought-iron seats in positions where the best views could be obtained, flower beds including shrubs donated as gifts by prominent townspeople and a 5' 6" unclimbable wrought-iron fence replacing earlier wooden hurdle boundary fencing (Chatham Observer712.5 26th June 1897). The bandstand was very well used with a weekly summer programme; within a wooden hurdle fence around the bandstand seating was provided for a penny per person and, beyond, a gently sloping grass area was used by many other visitors for free (Couchman Collection DE402/17/27L)

On 14th October 1908 an application was made by the Town Council to the Local Government Board for sanction to borrow £1,250 to purchase Victoria Gardens and certain adjoining ground for the purpose of 'Public Walks and Pleasure Grounds' The 'certain adjoining ground' was an area of land of about a quarter of an acre which fell within the City of Rochester boundary and was to be enclosed with the Gardens. The Town Clerk advised the Inspector at the subsequent

enquiry in January 1909 that the ‘Gardens were picturesquely situated, that there were commanding views from them of the Medway and the surrounding country, and that they were very attractive for residents and visitors’ (Chatham News 9th January 1909). The gardens were originally set back some 30m from Fort Pitt Hill Road (3rd edition OS map 1907-23) but subsequently extended to the road, before the issue of the 4th edition OS map in 1929-52, to the current (2013) boundary. This extension included land that was within the City of Rochester.

Later additions comprise a flagpole c1905 (contemporary photograph) and nearby a quick-firing gun taken in the Boer War. A photograph from 1965 shows the pole and the bandstand with its original railings and some stone plant containers around its base. At least two buildings with seating were added c1907 (still evident in a photograph from c1970) and a war memorial in Ionian stone commemorating both world wars was unveiled in November 1921 (Couchman Collection DE402/17/30).

Early C20 photographs show ornate railings supported on a brick wall to the northern boundary with New Road Avenue and similar railings along the southern boundary of Fort Pitt Hill road (Couchman Collection DE402/17/3 and 32L). All fencing has been removed with the exception of the remains of the posts in the supporting wall along New Road Avenue

Sometime in the C20 tarmac surfacing was applied to the paths with the exception of the paving slabs remaining adjacent to the war memorial and block paving leading to and around the bandstand.

In 1996 in an attempt to attract bands back, the bandstand was renovated at the cost of £50k (including a new roof, ceiling, lighting and a stone inscription and crest inserted into the brickwork surround).

The Gardens are currently owned and managed by Medway Council. In 2013 the Council carried out an audit of both Victoria Gardens and Jacksons Recreation following an amassed developer contribution of £160,000 to improve recreation facilities at both sites. In response to this audit a report detailing potential future investment opportunities was produced. This has been discussed with Heritage Lottery Fund with a view to potential submission of a Parks for People funding programme application.

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING

Victoria Gardens lie on the north-west side of Chatham, approximately 0.5 km from the centre of the town and abutted by mainly Victorian housing and Fort Pitt Grammar School to the South, the University for the Creative Arts and Fort Pitt Gardens to the west and central Chatham including the Kings Church (previously St Andrews) and land surrounding Chatham Railway Station to the north and east. The roughly rectangular site slopes steeply from the south west to the north east, its height varies between approximately 42 and 22 metres above sea level on a ridge of grey marl chalk with very thin or non- existent topsoil. The London to Chatham Railway line runs in a tunnel beneath.

New Road Avenue forms the northern boundary with a brick retaining wall approximately 600mm high with a concrete coping along the back on the pavement. This wall originally supported an ornate iron fence now (2013) gone (Couchman Collection DE402/17/31U). The eastern boundary comprises a chain link fence 2m high which extends southwards 65m as far as a children's play area where a gate provides access into the Gardens. The boundary along the remaining eastern side is formed of iron railings generally 1-1.5m high with a small square mesh attached to the garden side. Fort Pitt Hill Road forms the southern and western boundaries which are unfenced but vehicular access is prevented by a line of wooden or concrete bollards. The upper southern part of this road is shown on A B Walker's map of Chatham (1781-83) which extends eastwards to include Albany Terrace, Ordnance Terrace and Old Road having been interrupted by the construction of the railways during the 1850s. This southern boundary was originally formed by an ornate fence (similar to that along New Road Avenue) set into the ground directly (Couchman Collection DE402/17/3).

Victoria Gardens, along with Fort Pitt Gardens and Jackson Recreation Ground, form an almost continuous area of public parkland. Victoria Gardens occupies an area of approximately 2.5 hectares.

There are panoramic views from the southern, upper part of the site of the Medway conurbation comprising Rochester, Strood and Upnor to the north-west, Chatham to the north and north east including the Great Lines War Memorial. Within these views the River Medway lies to the north comprising Limehouse Reach to the west and Chatham Reach to the east. However these views are now blocked or partially obscured by some of the more recent (mid/late C20) tree planting and self-sown trees and also more recent building development to the north.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES

The Park can be entered on foot from five footpath entrances although effectively it can be entered at numerous other points on its boundaries as there is no physical barrier other than bollards. Vehicular access is gained from New Road Avenue via Fort Pitt Hill and Albany and Ordnance Terraces, both leading to the University and Grammar School. One of the two original 1897 main entrances is in the northeast corner of the gardens, from New Road Avenue, where one gate post remains on the south side of the entrance (Couchman Collection DE402/17/31U). The path from this entrance rises up the slope and is flanked by a low brick wall with a concrete coping and metal handrail on the south side suggesting that it survives from the original 1897 construction. Its early C20 flanking hedges are now (2013) gone (Couchman Collection). Protection from the slope on the north side of the path is now (2013) provided by a 300mm high wall constructed from broken paving stones.

The other original main entrance occurs at the junction of New Road and Fort Pitt Hill, a road which separates Victoria Gardens from Fort Pitt Gardens and provides vehicular access to the University for the Creative Arts. One brick pier,

2m high, remains at this entrance with evidence that this pier supported a gate. A photograph taken c1908 shows the gated entrance between two brick piers with ornate copings (Couchman Collection DE402/17/26L).

A further entrance occurs on Fort Pitt Hill road, opposite the University, which is marked by two brick pillars flanking the path, these originally supporting gates. This entrance was created when the Gardens were extended westwards sometime between 1923 and 1929 (3rd and 4th OS editions). The path from this entrance extends eastwards along the southern edge of the Gardens where it is joined by paths from two further entrances from Fort Pitt Hill road.

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS

The Gardens' layout comprises a system of wide informal paths with a centrally-located bandstand, all surviving from the original 1897 construction (3rdedition OS map (1907- 1923) and a Celtic cross war memorial dedicated in 1923.

The site is predominantly amenity grassland with mixed native and ornamental trees which line the perimeter paths. The older species (as recorded on the 3rd edition OS) include copper beech, oak, London plane, common lime, holly and horse chestnut. New planting of single ornamental trees are scattered around the Gardens.
In the south-west corner a concrete and stone base survives from a seating shelter located adjacent to the path which runs alongside the southern boundary. Early C20 photographs and both the 3rd and 4th edition OS maps show this shelter together with another similar one located in the north-east corner (both now, 2013, gone) (Couchman Collection DE402/17/29L & U).

The only evidence of the original formal flower beds survives on the north-eastern boundary, behind a short section of late C20 railings which has been erected where the land slopes steeply to the main road. Photographs from the early C20 show bedding and shrub displays alongside the southern boundary fence (Couchman Collection DE402/17/3) and further formal beds and areas of shrubs scattered more generally around the Gardens, all now (2013) gone (Couchman Collection DE402/17/27L,27U,29L &29U).

A playground is situated in the eastern corner of the gardens, relocated in the 1980s from its original site on relatively flat ground at the top of the hill on the south western side of the gardens. It was refurbished in 1992 and fenced to exclude dogs.

The WWI Celtic cross war memorial, standing 25 m from the lower path on the northern boundary and 70m west of the lower entrance access steps adjacent to New Road, is the focus for the annual Remembrance Day parade and service. A siren post, adjacent to the lower path and 50m from the entrance path on the western boundary, dating from WWII survives.

In 1999 a contemporary wooden sculpture known locally as 'MacDonald's Arches' by Anthony Holloway was installed at the top of the hill, 20m north of the

upper entrance which is 110m from the south west corner of the gardens. More recent additions include two CCTV posts.

The Flag-pole and Boer war gun have not survived and it is not known if and where they were re-located to.

REFERENCES

Books, articles:

P. Kendall, Defending the Dockyard-the Story of Chatham Lines (Unpublished report, English Heritage 2005)
M. Alexander, An Earthwork Analysis of Jackson Recreation Ground (English Heritage Report No5 -2008)
Pevsner: West Kent and the Weald
Medway Council, Victoria Gardens Chatham and Jacksons Recreation Ground Rochester, History of the Parks and future vision with funding options. (2013)

Maps

A B Walker, Chatham 1781-83
Tithe map (Chatham) c1840 Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre, Strood
OS 25" to 1mile: 1st edition 1862-1875,
OS 25" to 1mile: 2nd edition 1897-1900,
OS 25" to 1mile: 3rd edition 1907-1923,
OS 25" to 1 mile 4th edition 1929-1952

Illustrations

Selection of Postcards and Photographs, Couchman Collection 1914 to 1961 Medway Archives. DE402/17/3, 26L, 27L &U, 29L &U, 30.31U and 32L
Aerial photographs, RAF (1945-48)
Aerial photograph 2012- Kent County Council Heritage Conservation Group

Archival items

Victoria Gardens, Band Programme 1903
Articles from the Chatham News 1909 and Chatham Observer 1897
From Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre, Strood

Research by Geraldine Moon and Michael O'Brien;
Description written by Geraldine Moon
Virginia Hinze (editor)

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Fig. 1 Boundary map

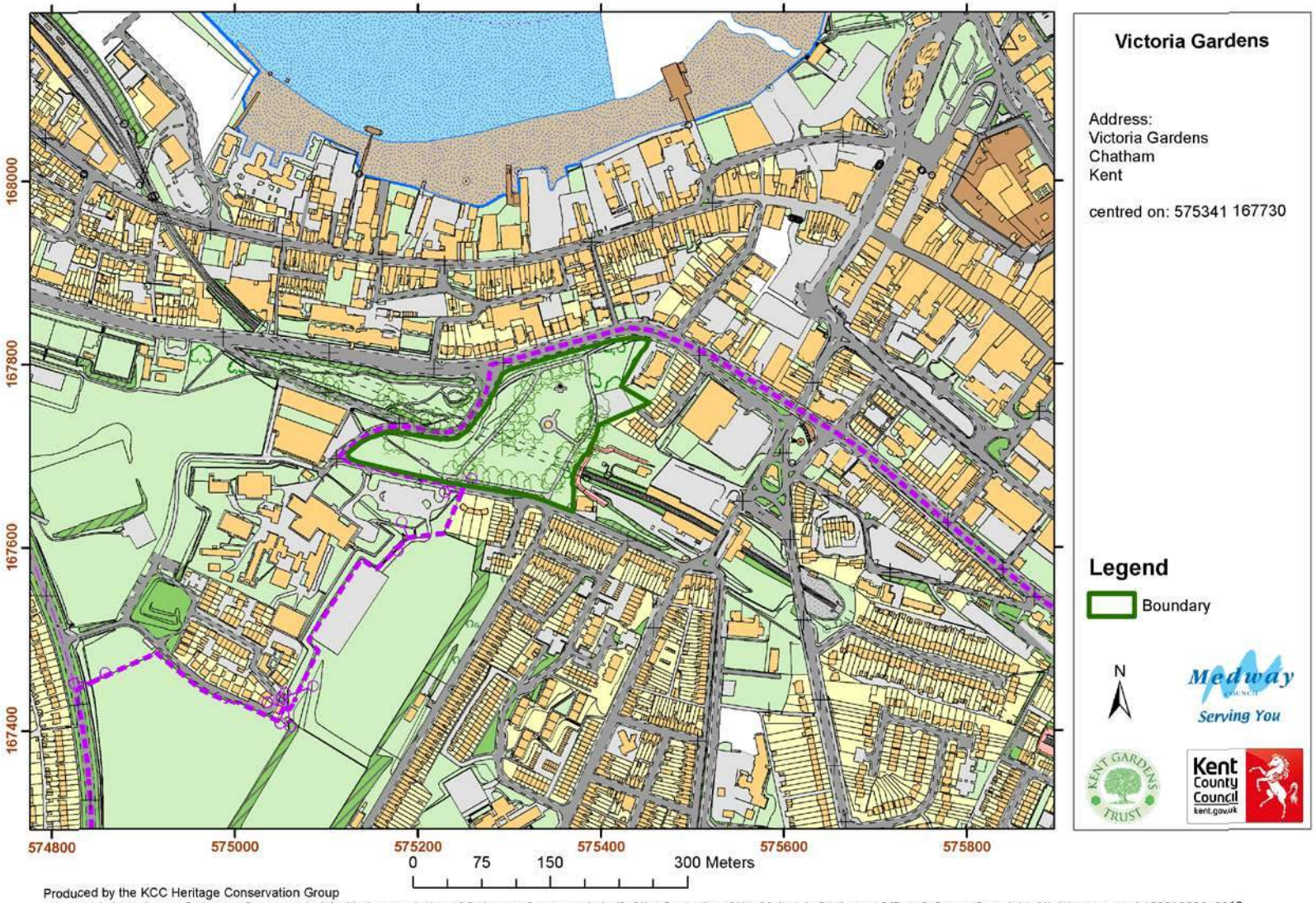

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Fig. 2 Key views map

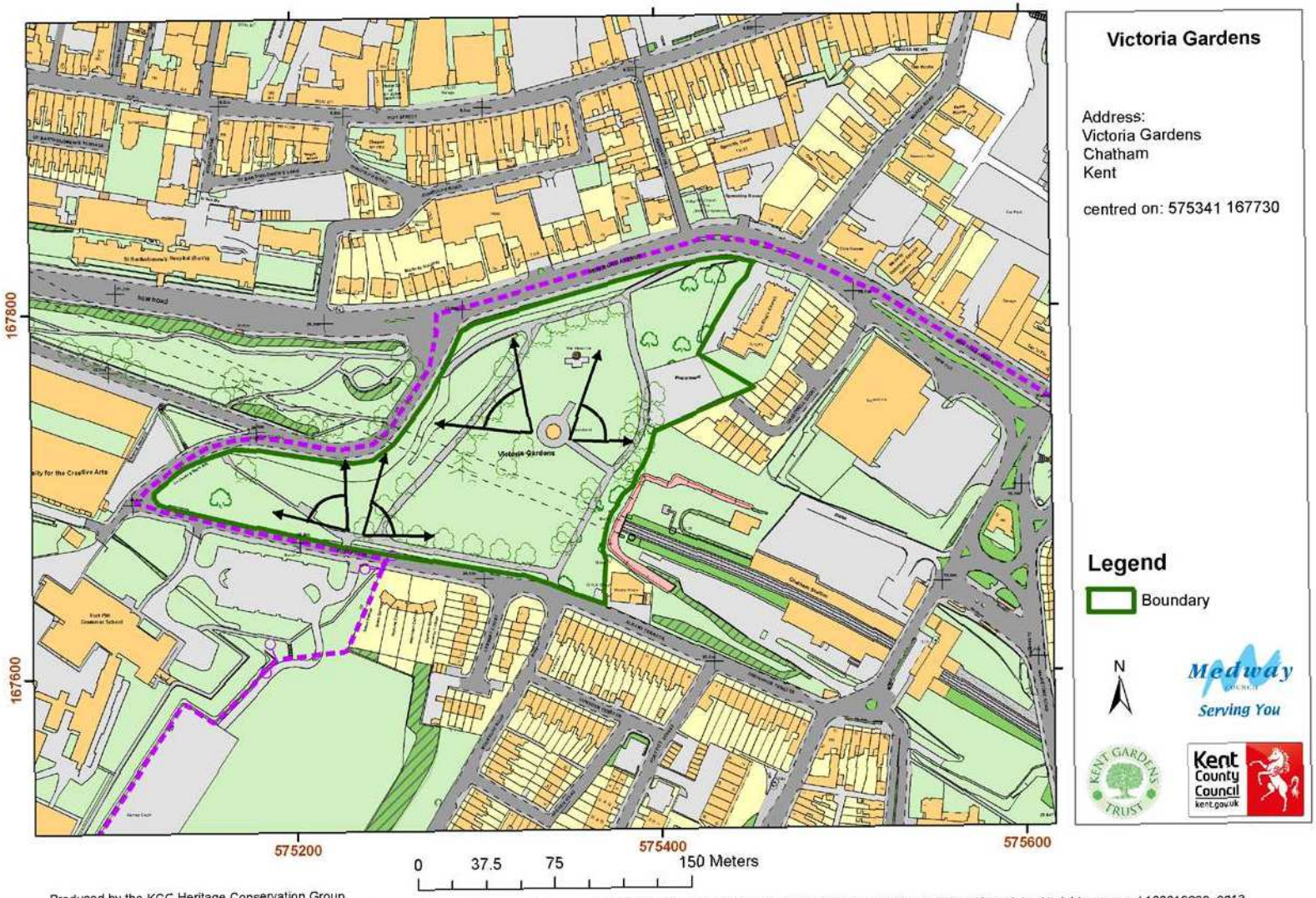

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Fig. 3 Key features map

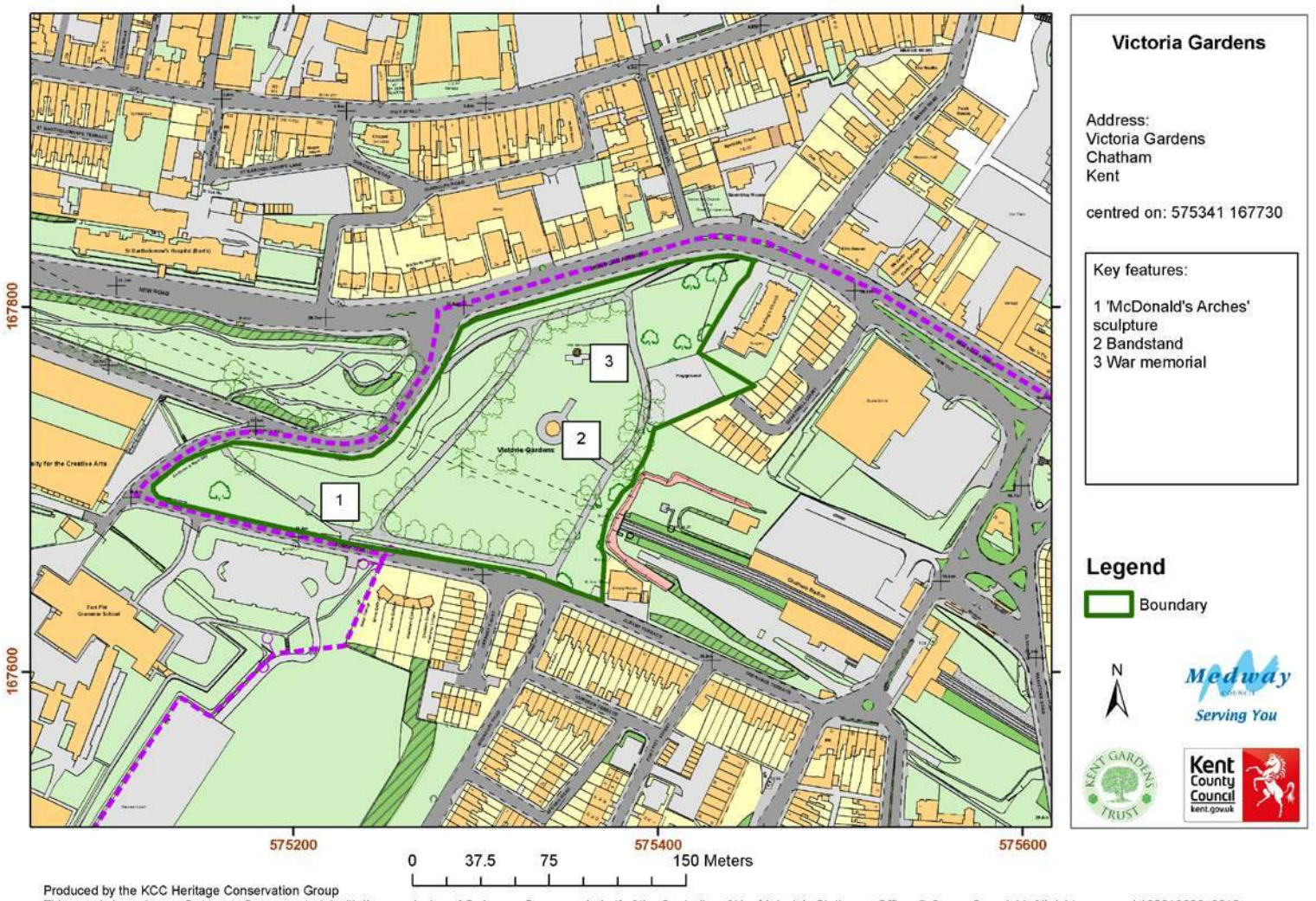

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Fig. 4 Aerial photograph (2012)

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Fig. 5 Ordnance Survey 1st edn 25" map (1862-1875)

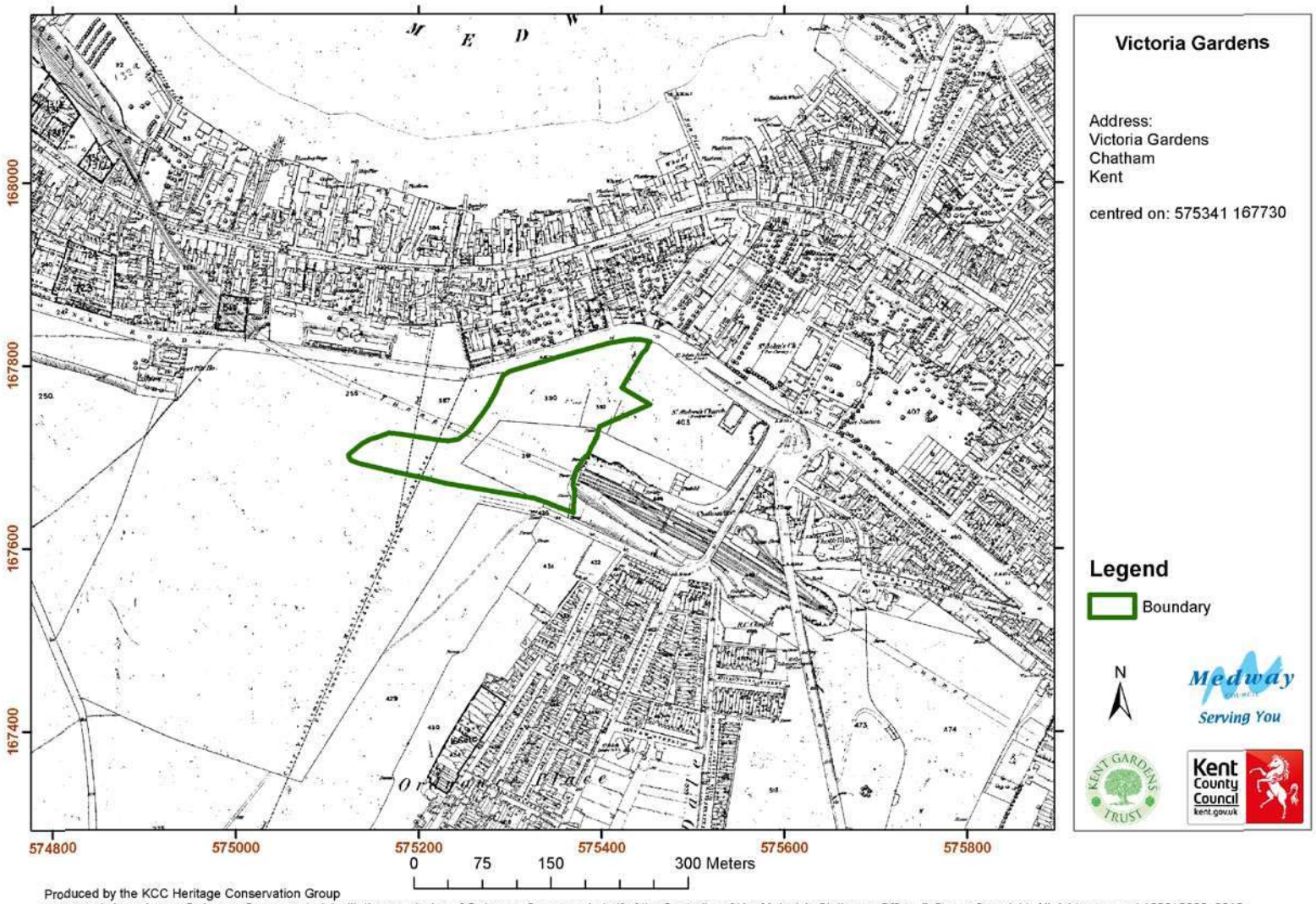

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Fig. 6 Ordnance Survey 2nd edn 25" map (1897-1900)

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Fig. 7 Ordnance Survey 3rd edn 25" map (1907-1923)

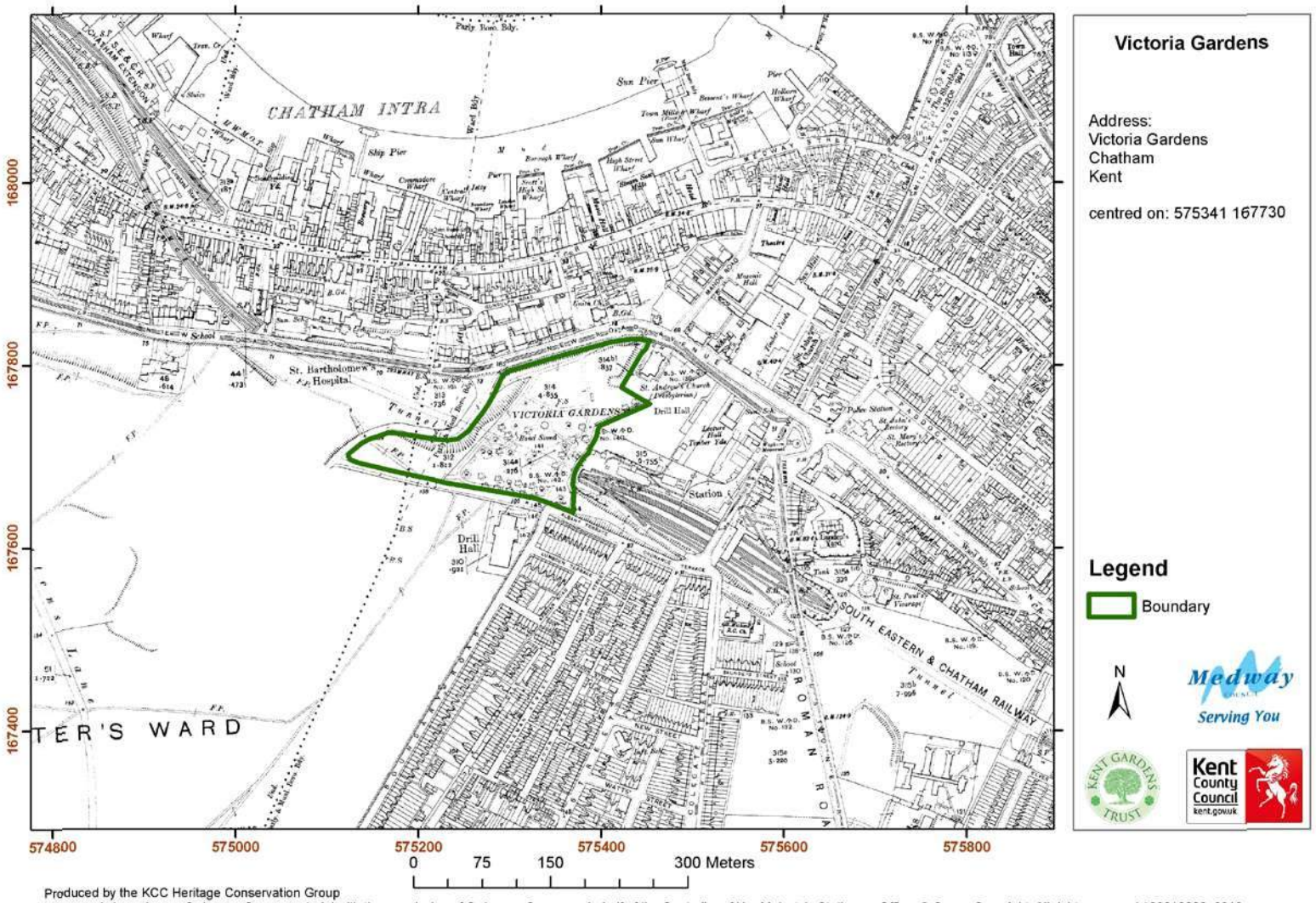

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Fig. 8 Ordnance Survey 4th edn 25" map (1929-1952)

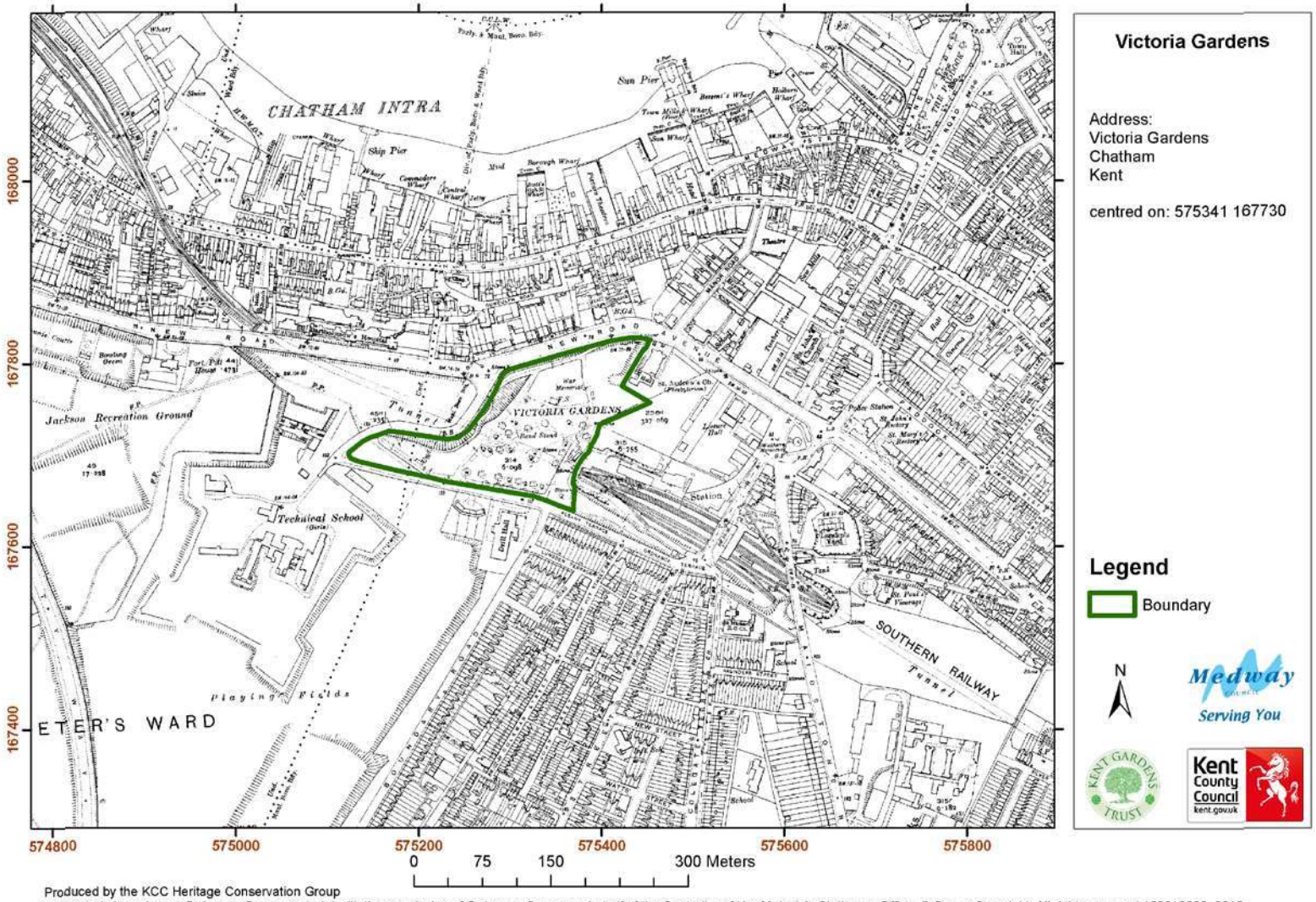

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Fig. 9 Postcard c1905 showing the newly opened Gardens and view to the Great Lines – Image courtesy of Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre

Fig. 10 Photograph 1962 showing the Gardens and view to the Great Lines – Image courtesy of Medway Archives and Local Studies Centre

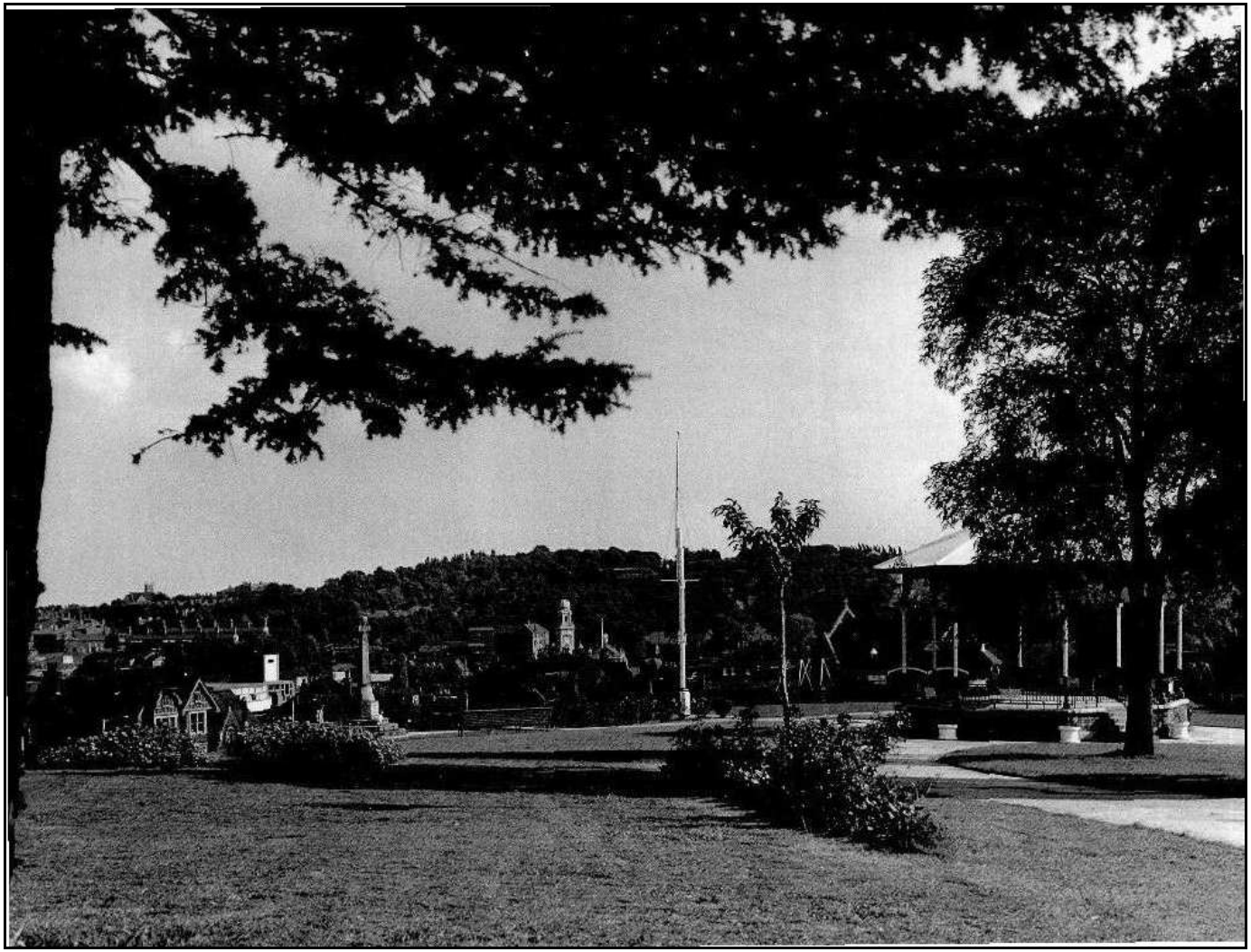

Fig. 11 Photograph 2013 showing the Gardens and view north-east towards the Great Lines

Fig. 12 Photograph 2013 showing the Gardens and view north-west towards the River Medway